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## IMPROVING THE TAKE UP OF FREE SCHOOL MEALS

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### Introduction

Free school meals have played an important role in the nutrition of children from poorer families for almost a century but there are current concerns that many children who are entitled to a meal do not take up this important benefit. It is estimated that of the 1.8 million children entitled to a free school meal, 20% for a variety of reasons do not take up their entitlement. New regulations from the Department for Education and Employment, require that, from April 2001, all school meals conform to nutritional standards with the recommendation that the free school meal should provide a two-course lunch and a drink. This report summarises the findings of a qualitative study undertaken for the Child Poverty Action Group between November 2000 and February 2001 to explore the reasons for non take up of entitlement and to identify good models of practice and successful strategies to maximise take up.

### Key Findings

The study identified the following key factors which limit take up:

- ◆ Fears by parents that their children will be stigmatised or will be embarrassed to be seen receiving free meals deters applications. Parents and pupils are concerned that those having free meals are marked out as 'different' from other pupils.
- ◆ Many schools still identify pupils having free school meals by using free tickets or tokens for meal payments or lists of free school meal pupils at cafeteria tills. Pupils having free packed lunches, in schools with no hot meal service, are readily identified by the distinctive packaging of their free meal.
- ◆ Pupils and parents believe that the quality and choice of food on offer and the conditions in which the school lunch is eaten, discourages eligible pupils from taking their free meals. Particularly in secondary schools, cafeterias and eating areas are often overcrowded and queuing for food deters pupils from eating there. The value of the free meal rarely permits pupils to eat a well balanced meal.
- ◆ Parents with children attending schools which offer no hot meal service are likely to decide against the free meal because they believe they can supply a better packed lunch from home.
- ◆ Not all parents were aware of their entitlement to free school meals for their children and consequently fail to apply for meals. Others are deterred from applying because they do not know how the system works at the school their child attends.

## Aims

The study examined how the nature of the school and its meal provision, its management and administration, influenced the take up of free meals. It identified good models of practice and successful strategies for schools to maximise the take up of free provision.

## Background

Free school meals have played an important role in the nutrition of children from poorer families for almost a century but there are current concerns that many children who are entitled to a meal do not take up this important benefit. Recent moves by DfEE to reintroduce compulsory nutritional standards for school meals should guarantee that children who eat the provided dinner receive a balanced meal at least once a day. In these circumstances, it becomes even more of a priority to ensure that children who have the right to a free meal actually take it. Currently, only those children whose parents are in receipt of Income Support or Income Based Jobseeker's Allowance or who receive these benefits in their own right are entitled to free school meals. Children of asylum seekers are also eligible in certain circumstances. It is estimated that 1.8 million children are entitled to a free school meal but that around 20%, for a variety of reasons, do not take up their entitlement.

## Methodology

Seven secondary, two middle and four primary schools in seven LEAs in England were selected as case studies. The schools represented both low and high registered eligibility for free meals. Each school was visited to see how school meals generally, and free school meals in particular, were organised. In addition to observation, over 250 pupils took part in group or individual interviews. School and catering staff were also interviewed. Over 450 secondary pupils completed questionnaires and over 50 parents took part in telephone interviews. LEA staff were also interviewed.

## Main findings

### *Stigma*

A third of pupils surveyed and over two-fifths of parents identified embarrassment or fear of being teased as factors which put people off taking their free meal. Memories of their own school days coloured parents' perceptions of how free meals operate today and they spoke of wanting to protect their children from being 'different' or feeling that they were 'not like other children'.

Whilst most pupils reported no instances of those receiving free meals being teased or bullied because of the provision, there was evidence that this did occur, unbeknown to school staff, and especially in schools where only a few pupils took free meals. However, even in schools where pupils reported no overt teasing or name calling, pupils were sensitive to what they believed others thought of them. Some pupils said that they preferred not to take up their entitlement because they knew that other people would be aware of their free meal status.

Even schools that believe they are providing fair and non discriminatory arrangements for free school meals, continue to operate systems which make pupils on free school meals readily identifiable. Parents and pupils raised two major concerns that gave rise to discrimination, the systems of payment for cafeteria meals and the storage and presentation of free packed lunches.

If pupils have to identify themselves in any way to the dinner staff, either by giving their names or producing tickets or tokens for their meal, this was a source of embarrassment for some pupils. Two secondary schools had recently introduced cashless systems in their cafeterias so that all pupils used smart cards to pay for their meals. This meant that pupils taking free meals could retain their anonymity at the till. In schools where only free packed meals were on offer, parents who declined to take up meals

said that the high profile packaging of the meals and their storage separately from other pupils' home produced lunches had deterred them from applying.

### *The quality of the meal*

Over the past twenty years the proportion of all pupils eating their lunch in school everyday has declined substantially. In three of the seven secondary schools studied, only one fifth of pupils chose to eat in the school cafeteria everyday. When asked why people did not take up their entitlement to free school meals, around two-thirds of pupils and parents considered that the quality and choice of food on offer discouraged take up. Often the choices available in school, particularly in secondary cafeterias, were described as unappealing, with unhealthy options and a restricted and repetitive range of food. Vegetarians and those with restricted dietary requirements faced very limited menus. In six out of the seven cafeterias, paying pupils spent on average between 20-30p more than the value of the free school meal on their daily lunch. The value of the free school meal failed to provide a well balanced two course meal in most of these cafeterias. Combined with the overcrowded dining rooms and long queues, pupils were put off taking up their free meal, particularly if their friends were bringing a packed lunch from home and they were unable to eat their lunch with them.

Of the six case study primary and middle schools, only three offered a hot meal service. The others, in common with many small schools, provided only a packed lunch for eligible pupils. The study found that schools offering only a packed lunch were unlikely to have full take up of free school meals by eligible pupils. Parents said that they did not apply because they believed that they could provide a better packed lunch for their children from home. Pupils expressed concerns about having no choice in what the free lunch contained, unlike lunches brought from home where they usually had some say in what their parents packed for

them. This lack of any choice or control over the content of the free packed meal worried many children.

However, two schools had taken positive steps to address the packed lunch problem.

One school had introduced a hot meal service. Having no kitchen facilities on site, the meal was brought in by a local contractor. After one term, 40% of all pupils were having the hot meal every day and the percentage of pupils taking free school meals increased from 5% to 14% in one term.

A second school, achieved a modest rise in take up (1%) by using its delegated budget to produce packed lunches 'in house' rather than receiving them from an outside supplier. This meant that the packed lunches were freshly prepared and gave pupils the opportunity to exercise some choice in the content of meals, letting the sandwich maker know their preferences.

### **Improving access to free school meals**

Although the majority of parents said that they knew that free school meals existed, 11% of eligible parents who were interviewed had not claimed meals because they did not know they were eligible or how to apply.

Several parents questioned why, when they completed forms for the DSS or the Jobcentre, there were no direct links to register them for these additional benefits. Most schools included information about eligibility and availability of free school meals in induction packs for new pupils and often included registration forms, reminding parents about the free provision in newsletters and at open evenings.

Even when parents knew they were entitled, some needed to be reassured about how free school meals operated in their child's school before they would apply. Some were concerned that, in registering their child for free school meals, they did not know what they would be committing their child to receiving.

## Conclusions

The study identified a number of good practice strategies which might be adopted to encourage more parents and pupils to take up free meals.

- Schools can improve take up of free provision by providing meals that parents value and pupils want to eat.
- In schools with a cafeteria the value of the free meal should keep pace with the purchase price of a healthy meal.
- Schools, LEAs and benefit providers need to ensure that parents are aware of their eligibility. Benefit providers could offer parents direct registration of eligibility with the LEA.
- Schools should send regular reminders to ensure that, should parents' circumstances change, they are aware of their eligibility.
- Schools need to 'sell' the free school meal option to parents especially in schools where only a minority of pupils qualify for free lunch and there is no 'grapevine' of information. They should let parents see what is on offer as a free meal and stress the value, nutritionally and financially.
- Having a free school meal should not prevent pupils from eating with their friends who bring packed lunch from home. If dining space is limited, then cafeterias should provide the option of a packed meal which pupils can take out to eat with friends.
- Schools need to be vigilant to discourage teasing and name calling of pupils on free school meals especially in schools where few pupils take free school meal pupils.
- Schools with cafeteria systems should where possible introduce cashless systems such as swipe cards to help eliminate identification at the tills.

- Schools with low eligibility for free meals and providing only packed lunches should reduce the high profile of the free meals by encouraging pupils to bring their own lunchboxes for the free meals and explore ways of storing all packed meals together.
- Schools should ensure that the food offered provides sufficient choice and variety for free school meals pupils who follow restricted diets.

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